United Nations E/CN.6/2004/NGO/2

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
14 January 2004

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Forty-eighth session
1-12 March 2004
Item 3 (c) (i) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

Statement submitted by the Radin Institute for Family Health Education and Promotion, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.6/2004/1.

04-20919 (E) 090204

This statement addresses how important is the role of men and boys in successful integration of gender equity initiative into reproductive health programs. Achieving equity between women and men will require changes at many levels, including changing behaviors at individual level, changing legal frameworks and economic institutions at community level. The global strategy for the promotion of gender equity was mainly established in the Beijing Platform for Action of Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995. However, the full communication and partnership between men and women and sharing of responsibilities between men and women as equal partners to achieve better reproductive health were emphasized in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD).The Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) clearly set a new agenda in 1994 when it talked about male responsibilities and participation: "The objective is to promote gender equality in all spheres of life, including family and community life, and to encourage and enable men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behavior and their social and family roles."

Despite the commitment to promoting gender equity in reproductive health programs there are barriers to the expansion of male involvement:

- Most family planning and reproductive health programs have been designed for adult women. The exclusion of men from programs means the exclusion of men from education regarding sexuality, fertility, anatomy, contraception, and the prevention of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) and HIV/AIDS.

- Reproductive health care providers have been trained to counsel women, and need to adapt to counseling men, or to counsel men and women together. Providers can not assume that men are not interested in contraception or reproductive health, as many studies show that men are supportive of contraception and believe that contraceptive and family planning decisions should be made jointly.

- Program planning for increasing male involvement is impeded by a lack of up-to-date information on male attitudes, knowledge and practices related to family planning and reproductive health.

- Adolescent males have very little access to reproductive health services as most programs and services are designed and aimed at adult women. The lack of appropriate information and services for young men helps to perpetuate harmful attitudes and stereotypical behavior.

Related issues include the effect of the traditional role of the father on health and nutrition, and the relation of fathering to early childhood development. Other issues concerned violence in the family setting and gender relations in sexual decision-making and their consequences for HIV transmission. It was found that major barriers to men's involvement are poverty and unemployment, fathers' lack of contact with their children and patterns of gender role socialization.

To enhance gender equity and support partnerships between men and women in families, we believe that there are many ways of accommodating change while remaining faithful to valued cultural traditions.

Men's roles in families are not improved automatically by their presence, nor do children necessarily benefit. Problems may arise if the father is at home but

decision-making is not shared by both parents, as is often the case. Child welfare suffers when men unleash violence against women and children, when men spend income on goods that do not contribute to family welfare, such as alcohol, and when they serve as negative role models.

Family life education should be based on real families and real life. It is especially important that girls be given the knowledge, skills and means to be financially responsible for themselves and any children they may have. Boys need to be taught that fatherhood means supporting their children financially and sharing responsibility for their care.

Women's empowerment begins in the household with equality, autonomy and respect. Achieving equality between men and women in the family is the foundation on which empowerment in other areas is based. Women's lives are usually described in terms of motherhood, while men's lives are usually characterized as heads of household or wage- earners. Men's role as fathers tends to be vague. Yet, men's commitment to their children is key to the quality of family life.

Children, parents and society benefit from men's active involvement with their children. There are economic benefits because it reduces the dependency on women and, at the same time, allow more time to be spent by parents on their child's development. There are also social benefits because when fathers are actively involved, children's emotional and social well-being and self-esteem are enhanced, and the likelihood of behavioral problems falls.

Economic, cultural and other factors influence the amount of time fathers spend with their children. Cultural factors are perhaps paramount. In many societies, fathers' limited participation in childcare is linked very strongly to beliefs that close father-child relations are not appropriate.

A set of practical policies and programs should include the following:

- To successfully promote male involvement in the family, concerned leaders, governments, and NGOs must work to educate boys and men to prepare them for a broader fathering role. This kind of education, combined with experience, can strengthen the bonds between fathers and children.

- The media could be used to popularize a positive picture of relationships between fathers and children. The increasing prevalence of paternity leave for men as a key development should be spread beyond the North.

- Policies and programs must be put in place, which recognize the critical role of both parents in the family. Reinforcing the parent-child link is critical to efforts to empower women and promote gender equity.

- Employment, economic and childcare policies should support parents' necessary pursuit of livelihoods as well as their equally essential commitments to children and partners.